

From: Jay Hipps
To: Microsoft ATR
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Subject: Comments on Microsoft Anti-Trust Action

To whom it may concern:

As someone who has used computers for over 20 years, I feel compelled to write regarding the current legal action against Microsoft.

First of all, I think some perspective is needed. The computer industry is, in many ways, an outgrowth of the scientific community. The scientific community has long operated on a particular set of standards and ethics which are designed to allow humanity's knowledge, as a body of information, to grow as quickly as possible. Discoveries are shared so that a breakthrough in one area might encourage a similar increase in knowledge in another.

Computer science once worked in the same way. Computer languages, usually developed by universities, were published openly, as were enhancements to these languages made by others. These Open Standards allowed the entire field of computer science to move forward, adding new innovations to past knowledge.

Admittedly, the industry has changed greatly. In some ways, it is a natural maturation -- the field is exponentially larger than it was 30 years ago and the market as it exists today is much different, after the personal computer revolution put machines into most of the homes in America. It is only natural that companies with commercial products will guard their new innovations more carefully than in the days when computers were limited to an academic and research environment. Surely there can be no objection to this by anyone with even a rudimentary understanding of the laws of economy and business that currently exist in both the U.S. and much of the world.

However, some holdovers from the days of scientific research remain, and it is here that I take issue with Microsoft. Open Standards are still an important part of the worldwide community of computer manufacturers and software developers.

A great example of this is the World Wide Web. The WWW operates primarily on "hypertext markup language," a way of encoding text and other information for viewing on the Internet. HTML's Open Standards are overseen by a non-profit governing body (the World Wide Web Consortium or W3C) which maintains the standard. (There are many similar examples of Open Standards -- Apple Computer created what they call Firewire, a data communications standard now recognized by the IEEE -- another standards body -- as IEEE 1394. Sony uses it, too, and calls it iLink.)

These Open Standards still play an important role in the computing community. They are the common ground shared by all computer users and are the lifeblood of the industry. This cannot be stated too strongly -- without Open Standards, the advancement of computer technology will become the sole domain of the largest companies already in the field. There is no true innovation without Open Standards.

Unfortunately, Microsoft has attempted to take advantage of the fairness and equal opportunity of the Open Standards model. They have repeatedly used Open Standards in their products and then, deviously, revised the implementation of these standards slightly, usually while they are claiming to "increase functionality" or "innovate." Due to their omnipresence in the marketplace, the bastardized Microsoft version of the standard quickly subverts the existing standard, which then allows the company to further extend their monopoly -- after the buying public discovers that Microsoft competitors' products don't work properly with the new Microsoft "standard."

I will let others with more technical knowledge than me enumerate Microsoft's uses of this strategy. I am familiar with a few -- the "enhancements" they made to HTML in order to strengthen the market share of Internet Explorer comes to mind immediately -- but I am a writer and not a technologist.

I will say, however, that I find the company's business practices extremely distasteful and I recommend exploring the full range of penalties to them, in order that they should cease their anticompetitive practices.

Regards,
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